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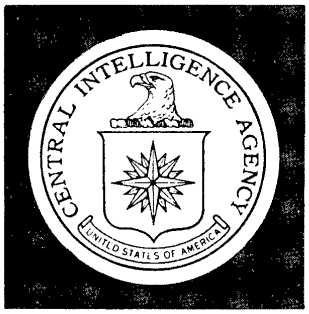

The President's Daily Brief

17 March 1969
(Morning)

19

~~*Top Secret*~~

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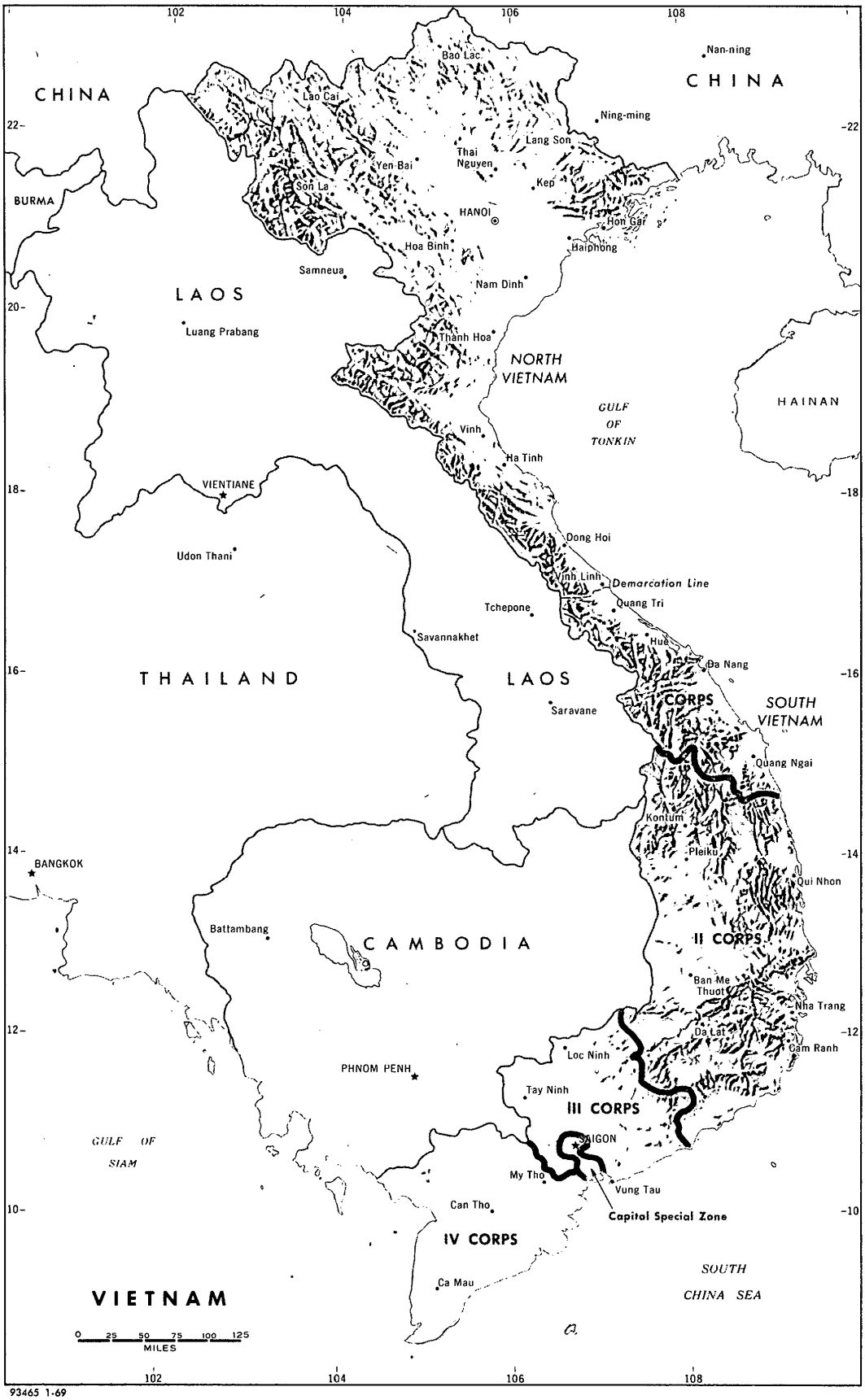

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I. MAJOR PROBLEMS

MIDDLE EAST

Israeli aircraft attacked terrorist bases in Jordan again today, according to press reports.

SOVIET AFFAIRS

There is nothing of significance to report.

EUROPE

There is nothing of significance to report.

VIETNAM

Soviet Ambassador Zorin shed no new light on the Vietnamese Communist line during his luncheon conversation with Ambassadors Lodge, Shriver, and Walsh last Friday. Zorin seemed mainly bent on giving the US a shove toward moving the talks forward. His new note of urgency is reminiscent of the advice the Soviets were giving last October when they repeatedly told the US to move rapidly on the bombing halt or lose a favorable opportunity for progress in the talks. Their approach at that time clearly reflected basic decisions in Hanoi and was not just another means of pushing the US in the right direction.

Zorin conveyed somewhat the same impression on Friday by saying the pace in Paris must be accelerated or we would "miss the train." In particular, he said, the Soviet border

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clash with China on 2 March underscored the "urgent need" for progress toward a settlement in Vietnam.

Zorin confirmed beyond doubt that the Vietnamese Communists are ready for private talks with the US. His claim that Hanoi and the Front are not prepared to talk to the GVN representatives is party line material and should not be considered the final word from the Vietnamese Communists. The latter recognize they will have to deal with the GVN eventually; they probably expect this to happen sooner rather than later.

As long as the Soviets show no sign of doing anything more positive than advising unilateral US concessions, Zorin's line that we need to move fast must be treated as primarily an attempt to pressure the US. The new Sino-Soviet border incident, however, and allegations that Peking is again interferring with Soviet rail shipments through China to North Vietnam make it almost certain that we are going to hear more of this theme from Moscow.

There are too many new cross-currents in Moscow-Peking-Hanoi relations at the moment to determine how North Vietnam is being affected by these developments or how they might influence Communist strategy for the war. Sino-Soviet tensions inevitably have an impact in Hanoi, and they are doubly unsettling when the regime is engaged in military activity which runs high risks of producing US retaliation against the North.

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[redacted] 50X1

* * *

The Communists conducted mortar and rocket attacks against allied military positions throughout the country and against selected urban centers during the first hours of the weekend, but the results were generally unimpressive. The sharp ground fighting that began east of Saigon on Friday continued throughout the weekend, spreading to other nearby provinces.

Saigon was hit by four rockets which did little damage on 15 March, the day following the rocket attack on Hue. Da Nang, however, was not hit.

Communist forces are continuing to make extensive use of the Demilitarized Zone, as activity picked up in that area. On Saturday, some 15 rockets were launched, apparently from positions within the DMZ, against allied installations at Cua Viet, and the Communists launched ground attacks just south of the Zone on 16 March, inflicting heavy casualties on an allied platoon. [redacted] 50X1

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[redacted]

Heavy ground action in III Corps included clashes in Tay Ninh, Binh Long, Bien Hoa, and Long Khanh provinces, but the enemy has not yet committed the bulk of his divisions surrounding the capital. 50X1

[redacted]

* * *

Nhan Dan, the Hanoi party daily, took note of President Nixon's press conference of 14 March in an editorial today. The editorial countered the President's comments on Vietnam with a fairly straight reiteration of the Communist demands for a US withdrawal and a settlement based on the Liberation Front's program.

II. OTHER IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS

Soviet Union - Communist China

Russian and Chinese versions of the border incident over the weekend differ, but both sides indicate that this second

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clash was larger than the one on 2 March. This time, artillery was used by both sides. The Soviets evidently had been patrolling the disputed island area heavily since the first encounter, and trouble probably stemmed from a Chinese decision to challenge these patrols.

The fighting has not spread to other areas, but there may well be more incidents over the disputed island. The Soviet protest note on Saturday said that Chinese and Soviet border troop representatives had met on 12 March, but apparently resolved nothing.

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UNITED KINGDOM - NIGERIA

Prime Minister Wilson will make a three- or four-day visit to Lagos beginning 26 March.

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